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Second Call for Proposals under *b-solutions*



Managed by the Association of European Border Regions by an Action Grant (CCI2017CE160AT082) agreed with the Directorate General of Regional and Urban Policy, European Commission. Financed by the European Union.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background Information

Within the 28 EU Member States and its neighbours in the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) there are some 40 land borders. This means 448 NUTS-3 territories located alongside at least one national boundary. Around 150 million Europeans live in these regions, almost one third of EU population.

In the early 1990s, with the introduction of the *Single Market*, the *Interreg*¹ initiative was established to enable border regions to cooperate more closely with the objective of exploiting their common potential in order to alleviate the possible losses linked to the disappearance of certain border-related jobs. This initiative has now become a fully-fledged objective under the Union's Cohesion Policy. Thousands of projects have received financial support since 1990 to better exploit border regions' potential and to overcome existing difficulties such as reduced accessibility, lack of cross-border public services, less incentives for SMEs, etc.

Despite these efforts, border stakeholders voice their concern at the existence of persisting challenges —notably of a legal and/or administrative nature— faced by border citizens and businesses when interacting across the border. These have direct and indirect impacts on their daily life: certain activities are still more complicated to perform across an internal EU border than they are inside a Member State. For instance, it is still difficult to take up a job on the other side of the border or to get treated in a hospital there even if there is very close proximity.

Taken together, these legal and administrative obstacles are a clear brake to the development of the endogenous growth potential of border regions. A recent study has shown that border regions could become on average 2% richer if 1/5 of legal and administrative obstacles were removed². Thousands of jobs could also be created.

Taking action to promote the prosperity and quality of life in cross-border regions, which are a sort of 'minilabs of European integration', has become a political imperative.

So far, work undertaken by the Commission services has highlighted a number of legal and administrative obstacles along many EU internal borders. The European Commission's *Cross-Border Review*³, launched during the 25th Anniversary of Interreg, has unveiled evidence to demonstrate that significant obstacles negatively affect life in border regions. Legal and/or administrative difficulties affect many aspects of life in border regions such as access to employment, access to healthcare, access to education and training, use of different technical standards, non-recognition of qualifications, lack of local cross-border public transport. Even in sectors where there is a comprehensive European legal framework or where coordination mechanisms exist at European level, obstacles appear which can be clearly linked to the presence of a national border.

On the other hand, there are in Europe numerous examples of institutional cooperation across borders that have made cross-border activities simpler, less costly and altogether more attractive. Cooperation associations such as the *Benelux Union* or the *Nordic Council of Ministers* aim at reducing the negative border effects between their members. At regional level, there are also examples such as the *Upper Rhine Conference*, and many euroregions, working communities, eurodistricts and EGTCs which have dotted European

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/de/policy/cooperation/european-territorial/

² Politecnico di Milano (2017) "Quantification of legal and administrative border obstacles in land border regions". <https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/evidence-and-data/quantification-effects-legal-and-administrative-border-obstacles-land-border>

³ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/de/policy/cooperation/european-territorial/cross-border/review/

borders with more or less strong platforms to promote mutual knowledge and cooperation. However, the picture is rather patchy and is far from covering the entire EU territory.

The EU needs to build upon these good practices from different border regions in order to address legal and administrative barriers more effectively and more comprehensively. Through the Communication *Boosting Growth and Cohesion in European Border Regions* (COM(2017)534 of 20 September 2017)⁴, the European Commission commits to promoting deeper cooperation and new mechanisms to remove obstacles or prevent their emergence. A **Border Focal Point** has been established in the Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) to coordinate the implementation of the proposed action plan and to provide Member States and other players with support to address border issues. An **online professional network**⁵ to present and discuss legal and administrative obstacles and possible solutions has been created and it is operational since 16 January 2018. The initiative *b-solutions* with its two calls, the first for pilot projects opened in 2018 and the present one for advice cases, is yet another specific action proposed in the Communication and now put into practice.

1.2 *b-solutions*

b-solutions is a 2-year **pilot initiative** financed by the EU budget, managed by the *Association of European Border Regions*⁶ (AEBR) and promoted by the European Commission's DG REGIO as one of the actions proposed in the referred Communication *Boosting Growth and Cohesion in EU Border Regions*.

The general objective of *b-solutions* is to identify and promote sustainable methods of resolving border obstacles of a legal and/or administrative nature along EU internal land borders.

b-solutions consists of two calls for proposals, one opened in early 2018 and the one currently running. Public authorities could seize the opportunity offered by *b-solutions* to **test** effective ways of overcoming border obstacles of a legal and/or administrative nature along EU internal land borders (including also the neighbouring EFTA countries) that can be replicable in other contexts - in the form of pilot actions (first call) or advice cases (second call). Selected applicants receive support from the European Commission to tackle the difficulties which hinder cooperation with the neighbouring country.

To increase their replicability, and to facilitate that the solutions found can inspire other solutions to similar problems in other border regions, AEBR will disseminate the outcome. Participants should also communicate the results achieved via the online platform "[Boosting EU border regions](#)".

After the reporting phase of the pilot actions and advice cases implemented under both calls, AEBR, in cooperation with the Commission services, will elaborate a consolidated report (**compendium**) illustrating main findings and proposals derived from the cases, and will also report on all cases identified. Lessons learned and policy recommendations for decision-makers are expected to be major outputs of the *b-solutions* initiative. That said, *b-solutions* is expected to provide with:

- Solutions addressing specific legal and administrative obstacles, tested and based in case-studies, which should be replicable, made available and promoted to other border regions across Europe.

⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/information/publications/communications/2017/boosting-growth-and-cohesion-in-eu-border-regions

⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/border-regions>

⁶ <http://www.aebr.eu/en/>

- Innovative proposals developed that can inform further development and implementation of future approaches by national/regional authorities and/or via EU instruments (particularly, but not exclusively, Interreg).
- Evidence of increased exchange of information and mutual engagement between the different levels of administration in border areas, and of joint initiatives involving multi-level governance across borders.
- Increased understanding of specific obstacles, and potential 'solutions', amongst key stakeholders at local/regional/national/EU level.

There are two levels of expected impact:

- the particular impact in relation to the specific cases due to overcoming an identified obstacle; and
- a broader impact on other areas that can be achieved if innovative approaches are developed that are truly replicable and can be effectively promoted and disseminated across the EU inspiring similar solutions to be implemented in other border regions. In addition, part of the impact will be a substantial increase in awareness of, and knowledge about, various legal/administrative obstacles to cross-border interactions.

1.3 The present call for proposals

AEBR in cooperation with DG REGIO is now opening a second call for proposals under the pilot initiative of *b-solutions* to identify further cases where a legal or administrative obstacle hinders cooperation amongst border regions.

The advice cases applied for in the current call must focus on one of the thematic areas addressed in the Communication and accompanying *Staff Working Document*⁷, i.e. (1) employment, (2) health, (3) transport, (4) multi-lingualism, (5) institutional cooperation, (6) information services, (7) eGovernment and (8) evidence and data. Each of these cases will have the objective of exploring one specific obstacle encountered in one specific border. Cases will be implemented during a maximum period of 4 months.

These advice cases are neither meant to solve problems associated with lack of infrastructures nor to be the source for significant investments in the border regions. Their main purpose is to address **cases** where interactions across the border are more difficult either because of **lack of coherence** of legislation⁸ applicable on the different sides of the border, or because of **inconsistencies** and overlapping of the different **administrative procedures**, or even because applicable legislation does not take into account the **specificity of cross-border interactions**.

Advice cases to be supported by *b-solutions* shall address real and documented **obstacles** of an administrative and/or legal nature hampering cross-border cooperation in one of the thematic fields addressed in the Communication. Applications should also outline the potential increase in **cross-border cooperation** if the obstacle is solved; the applicant's or the partners' **mandate** to devise solutions and the **replicability** potential of the action.

Within the present call, successful applicants will be attributed the **support** of legal experts with knowledge of cross-border instances who will cooperate with the participants in *b-solutions*. The experts will grant support in defining the obstacle in a clear and systematic way, as well as in identifying a solution and outline a legal framework from which to

⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/2014/boosting_growth/swd_boosting_border_en.pdf

⁸ Legislation in here seen in a broader context, including all regulatory framework, regardless of its source or level, applicable in the field addressed by a specific project on that territory.

proceed. The legal expert attributed to successful applicants would lead, in each advice case, to a case report that will include i) a clear description of the legal obstacle, ii) a clear indication of the legal dispositions causing the obstacle and iii) a roadmap towards a possible solution with iv) indication of the entities to be involved in the possible solution.

The present document sets out the requirements and the process to follow in order to submit a proposal and it should be read in conjunction with the *b-solutions* "Guidelines" published on the *b-solutions* website⁹.

⁹ <https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/>

2. THEMATIC COVERAGE FOR THIS CALL FOR PROPOSALS

The Commission has decided to closely align the topics of this pilot initiative to those defined in the framework of the Communication *Boosting Growth and Cohesion in European Border Regions*. For the present Call for Proposals, applicants can submit advice case proposals addressing the following topics: (1) employment, (2) health, (3) transport, (4) multi-lingualism, (5) institutional cooperation, (6) information services, (7) eGovernment and (8) evidence and data.

Public authorities applying in the framework of the *b-solutions* Call for Proposals are requested to select only one of the topics proposed.

As stated, the Commission's and AEBR's desire is to see advice cases proposed that bring tangible, durable, effective and replicable solutions to address cross-border obstacles of a legal and/or administrative nature along EU internal land borders.

The following sections provide detailed descriptions for the thematic areas of the present Call for Proposals.

2.1 Employment

Labour mobility is the most important area directly affected by border obstacles. This particularly concerns cross-border workers who live on one side of the border and travel to work on the other side of the border on a daily or weekly basis. A number of tools and coordination mechanisms exist at European level to facilitate cross-border work such as the *European Network of Employment Services (EURES)*, rules for the coordination of social security systems, the *European Qualifications Framework* which supports understanding and comparison of qualifications, the *Europass* Framework which enables individuals to communicate their skills and qualifications, the European classification of skills, competences, qualifications and occupations and the *European Professional Card*, an EU-wide digital procedure for the recognition of professional qualifications. A good practice example in Social Security is the *Social Security and Labour Inspection* of Galicia and that of North Portugal. They have created a network supported by the local EURES cross-border partnership, which allows a faster resolution of obstacles to cross-border mobility of employers and workers. There are other cross-border areas active in facing labour challenges such as the Upper Rhine (CH-DE-FR) or the Oresund Region (DK-SE).

Obstacles related to employment can refer to a lack of cooperation between public employment services in border regions; difficulties in accessing general information and vacancies in the cross-border labour market; the recognition of diplomas and skills; taxation, social security and pension rights issues.

2.2 Health (including emergency services)

Encouraging cooperation between the Member States to improve complementarity of their health services in border regions is a priority for the EU. This means focusing not only on pure health care services but also on other health-related infrastructures and procedures. For instance, different structures and principles exist for the reimbursement of cross-border healthcare resulting in e.g. different and complex procedures for the prior authorisation of health services and payments/reimbursements; administrative burden for patients dealing with cross-border consultations with specialists; incompatibilities in the use of technology and in the sharing of patient data; and lack of unified accessible information, which also includes a lack of information in the patients' language. In addition, limited accessibility from both sides of the border often hampers the full use of the health

care facility. Emergency and rescue services are also sometimes impeded in carrying out cross-border interventions.

There are some excellent examples of cooperation in this field (e.g. the ZOASTS on the Belgian-French border, or the Cerdanya Hospital on the French-Spanish border) but, as explained above, there are still many issues to solve in order to achieve a consolidated and fruitful cooperation which deliver better healthcare for border citizens, and a more efficient use of health facilities and other resources, in particular emergency services.

Under this topic, applicants can outline obstacles related to access to health services in cross-border areas; access to facilities providing health service; access to emergency services, and other cases.

2.3 (Public) transport of passengers

Transport is a key enabler of exchanges between regions across national borders. Especially public transport services not only help integration processes but also enhance the sustainability of cross-border connectivity. Lacking, insufficient or low-quality public transport services are still a reality for many citizens in border regions. This concerns three levels: 1) infrastructure connections, 2) service provision, and 3) the quality of services.

Applicants can include obstacles in providing public transport services and related aspects, for instance the coordination of transport planning, transport pricing, integration of timetables, easy and multilingual access to information, joint smart ticketing across the specific border, etc.

2.4 Multi-lingualism

Multilingualism is a European integration goal. The ability to speak foreign languages is also increasingly important to boost employability, mobility and competitiveness, which is of particular relevance in border regions. Many examples of bilingualism projects are already available as a source of inspiration, such as the "France-strategy", which was adopted by the German region of Saarland in 2014 to promote a bilingual approach at all levels of administration. There are other interesting approaches in high multilingual areas, like the Alpine region, but also in previously divided areas, like German-Polish or German Czech border areas.

Obstacles related to multi-lingualism can include difficulties in promoting multilingualism and failed attempts in making a multilingual approach easier (e.g. mainstreaming bi-lingualism or life-long language learning) in the specific border region.

2.5 Institutional Cooperation

EU Member States have different administrative cultures and systems. This diversity can be a constraint when different systems meet. Most administrative procedures tend to be of a national nature and cross-border procedures are less widespread. However, border stakeholders may well require non-domestic procedures on a regular basis. The lack of common approach or understanding, and the limited existence of mutually recognised documents can lead to lengthy and costly procedures, even for key life events.

Actions under this topic can touch upon various fields of activity, for instance, mutual recognition of qualifications, data, information, etc.

2.6 Information Services

Resolving border obstacles will take time and sustained effort. In the meantime, access to available and reliable information and problem-solving services on life or work on the other side of the border is vital. Preparatory work for the European Commission's Communication has highlighted concerns by individuals and businesses at the lack of reliable information services which can lead to legal uncertainty that hampers cross-border interaction or makes the implementation of cross-border projects longer and more costly.

Under this thematic area, applicants can present obstacles in providing shared reliable information and services on relevant issues in the border region and in the neighbouring region.

2.7 eGovernment

Promoting ongoing and future eGovernment projects to engage the stakeholders of the border regions in order to deliver cross-border public services that meet the needs of individuals and businesses in border areas can bring positive results in terms of open, efficient and inclusive public administrations. eGovernments could also support the provision of borderless, personalised end-to-end digital public services.

Under this thematic focus, applicants can present obstacles related to various aspects related to e-solutions, for example looking at specific cross-border needs: Interactions is difficult when two systems working at different speeds meet, interoperability of public authorities is limited, interfaces are only programmed in one language, etc.

2.8 Evidence and Data

Collecting data and evidence on border obstacles is the first necessary step towards resolving them but only limited resources are invested in collecting and analysing information on border difficulties and complexities. Similarly, the limited availability of statistical and geospatial data on cross-border flows reduces the scope for genuine cross-border policy development and decision-making. A few regional efforts have been made that other regions could build upon. Statistical and geospatial data describing cross-border flows and phenomena is not always sufficiently available or standardised to allow policy-makers to take informed decisions.

Applicants are invited here to describe obstacles in promoting shared collection of data and failed attempts in making an endeavour in this sense in the specific border region. Specific actions could be the comparison of data, the dissemination of data in all languages required, the creation of common databases, the collection of administrative and census data, etc.

3. ELIGIBLE ORGANISATIONS – WHO CAN APPLY?

Eligible organisations are public bodies (national, regional, local) with a national boundary limiting their territory and cross-border entities such as *European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation* (EGTCs), *Euroregions*, *Eurodistricts*, *Eurocities* and similar cross border structures with legal personality, even if they are not public bodies.

The concept of territory, as applied in this call for proposals, is not limited to the territory in which one entity is located. It covers the territory for which a given public institution or body has a mandate, meaning the legal competence to intervene in certain areas and territories.

The application can involve one or more partners, possibly from the other side(s) of the border, but this is not a prerequisite. There is no maximum limit to the number of partners, though feasibility of the proposals should be taken into account when defining the consortia.

A natural person cannot be, in any case, considered as a partner.

The following principles apply to all eligible applicants in the framework of the *b-solutions* Initiative:

- All applicants shall be located in an EU Member State (or neighbouring EFTA country) and their territories share at least one EU internal land border with another EU Member State/EFTA country.
- Only eligible public bodies (or cross-border structures) as "applicants" may submit an Application Form in the framework of the present Call for Proposals.
- Any applicant or partner can be involved in only one advice case proposal within the same thematic area in the framework of the present Call for Proposals.

During the eligibility check, in case any applicant's status as eligible candidate is uncertain, the AEBR will seek clarifications with all relevant partners to determine eligibility.

4. ONLINE APPLICATION FORM – HOW TO APPLY

The link to the online Application Form is: <https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/apply>

Please refer to the "Guidelines" document which contains detailed instructions on how to fill in the online Application Form.

The application process is 100% paperless through the use of the b-solutions website (<https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/>).

The application consists of an online Application Form. Annexes can also be uploaded and attached to the Application Form. These could be a map presenting the area of intervention, a graph, an infographic, etc. The type and size of the accepted files to be annexed are specified in the dedicated webpage.

All applicants must fill in the Application Form in English.

The final deadline for the submission of the Application Form and Confirmation sheet is 15/03/2019 18h00 CET.

5. SELECTION PROCESS

Following submission, each application is subject to a selection process organised along the following steps:

1. Eligibility check

2. Assessment by AEBR and the European Commission (Border Focal Point).

Selection procedure in short:

- Application forms will be received in electronic format, and confirmation of receipt will be sent to applicants. Eligibility checks will be performed by AEBR.
- The main selection criterion will be: "the proposed action addresses real and documented obstacles of an administrative and/or legal nature hampering cross-border cooperation in one of the thematic fields addressed in the Communication". Other criteria will be the potential increase in cross-border cooperation if the obstacle is solved; the applicant's or the partners' mandate to devise solutions; the replicability potential of the action.
- AEBR and the European Commission (Border Focal Point) will perform quality assessments and rank the proposals.
- AEBR will prepare an evaluation report to be submitted and discussed with the Commission, with a proposal of a maximum of 35 selected applications to be implemented. The final list of selected applications will be agreed with the European Commission.

Please bear in mind that during the selection and implementation of advice cases' proposals, the complementarity and synergies with other Union funding programmes and policies, as well as supported projects, is of utmost importance, but this specific action should not be funded under any other EU scheme¹⁰.

5.1 Eligibility check

Upon closure of the Call, AEBR will carry out an eligibility check on all submitted advice cases' applications. The purpose of the eligibility check is to verify compliance of the received applications and their annexes with the formal eligibility criteria.

b-solutions **general eligibility criteria** are the following:

1. the Application Form has been submitted electronically via the dedicated webpage before the deadline indicated in the present Call for Proposals;
2. the Application Form is completely filled in English;
3. the applicants correspond to the applicant's profile detailed under section 3 of the present Call for Proposals.

If any of the eligibility criteria set out above is not complied with, the application will be deemed ineligible and no further assessment will be undertaken.

5.2 Selection of the proposals to receive technical support

Criteria for the selection of *b-solutions* advice cases for being selected are:

1. the proposed action addresses real and documented obstacles of an administrative and/or legal nature hampering cross-border cooperation in one of the thematic fields addressed in the Communication;
2. the potential increase in cross-border cooperation if the obstacle is solved;
3. the applicant's or the partners' mandate to devise solutions;

¹⁰ Here it must be underlined that the action is not necessarily the complete solution. No double funding of the action is allowed, but the action may lead to an agreement or convention which will unblock future investment. That future investment could be funded by any means.

4. the replicability potential of the action.

The assessment will check the quality of the proposals.

After the assessment, AEBR will submit an evaluation report (including the list of cases proposed to be selected as advice case) to the Commission services, which will make the final decision as to which advice cases are selected.

All applicants will be notified at the end of this process of the decision taken on their proposals.

6. HOW TO GET ASSISTANCE

AEBR staff will be ready to assist applicants with any technical and procedural questions they may have during the Call for Proposals. Contact details can be found on the *b-solutions'* website (<https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/>).

A set of FAQs is available online¹¹, which will be updated regularly with practical questions posed by applicants through the functional *b-solutions'* s mailbox (b-solutions@aebr.eu).

7. KEY DATES

- Call opening: 30 January 2019
- Call closing: 15 March 2019
- Selection of successful proposals: second half of March 2019
- Implementation period: from selection notification to end of July 2019 (up to 4 months)

¹¹ <https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/info-kit>